

*From Romanticism to Supermodernity & Back Again:*

Sections on the ordinary,

the uneventful,

and the scene of genre

in Lauren Berlant's

*Cruel Optimism*

&

the work of Stanley Cavell

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We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk.

- Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107

[N]ot aware of what is going on there, not aware of what must be thought in the true thinking of Being as a whole, namely, that such thinking is a cry of distress, arising from a calamity.

- Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country...

- Thoreau, "Economy," *Walden*

§

Then how dangerous a loss would a break in our natural history signify? We might try imagining our response to one who begins periodically to move through comfortable rooms and along sunny, unobstructed sidewalks as though they were fields of ice, or paths along a precipice – flailing through an unremarkable corridor, huddling against sides of buildings – and who all the while insists that she is going on in the same way she has always done.

- Stanley Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event"

§

I see the eyes but not the tears

This is my affliction

- T.S. Eliot

### *Lauren Berlant's Cruel Optimism, Some Preliminary Remarks*

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* is a work that participates in the "ongoing storytelling" of the everyday, an everyday that amounts to how worlds get both made and mediated. However, Berlant distinguishes her version of the everyday not as a scene organized by capitalism (as "we find in Lefebvre and de Certeau," e.g.), but rather as "the overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by [capitalism], and by many other forces besides" (8). But why this new way of sensing the structure of the everyday? Because, for Berlant, the archive of modern everyday life theory, namely the "Euro-modernist concern with the *shock* of urban anomie and mass society... [a register] exemplified by the milling crowd and the compensatory consciousness and practice of the flaneur," is no longer an appropriate mode for surveying the conditions of a post-Fordist present posing significantly different contours of affective experience. Namely, this contemporary accounting assesses not a world population still assimilating to the early shocks and alienations of modern urban life, but one facing new demands for survival less shocking than they are "shapelessly" chronic. For Berlant, the shock of crisis has become the ongoing normalcy of crises' flat duration.

*Cruel Optimism* marks a turning away from everyday life theory as point of entry, or vehicle, towards a translation of the precarious present as "thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8). (In fact, here the impasse becomes the dominant genre of *Cruel Optimism*, representing the flat but insecure temporalities, the *longue durée*, of ordinary suffering – a present condition we are always in, yet always also trying to catch up with and overcome. "In the impasses induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown" (10).) One might say, vis-à-vis Berlant, that the characteristic gesture of this precarious ordinary, the *disorganized* everyday, is not the reflexive scanning and collecting of Benjamin's flaneur, but the scramble – the constant entrepreneurship of the self in the name of getting by and/or survival. But why the *scramble*? Berlant explains, as the state has withdrawn "from the uneven expansion of economic opportunity" fantasies of "postwar optimism for democratic access to the good life" are fraying: "[U]pward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment" (3).

### *Lauren Berlant's Stanley Cavell?*

Describing the zone of capital's disorganization, Lauren Berlant writes, "This ordinary is an intersecting space where many forces and histories circulate and become 'ready to hand' in the ordinary, as Stanley Cavell would put it, for inventing new rhythms for living, rhythms that could, at any time, congeal into norms, forms, and institutions" (9). My aim in this paper is to put Berlant and Cavell in conversation in such a manner that might enrich a reading of *Cruel Optimism*, understanding its partial genealogy or prehistory, and it is this reference to the Cavellian ordinary that signals the first of two explicit gestures to Cavell; dual references that interestingly enough bookend Berlant's eloquent but demanding book. The other explicit moment of Cavell occurs at the conclusion of *Cruel Optimism*'s final chapter, "On the Desire for the Political." In an uncharacteristically positive paragraph, offering a quick outline of some potential techniques for crossing over the very impasse under investigation, Berlant suggests "a philosophical pragmatism that involves becoming a political subject whose solidarities and commitments are neither to ends nor to imagining the pragmatics of consensual community, but to embodied processes of making solidarity itself" (260). And what might this look like? Berlant sketches out an assemblage of David Graeber's anthropological neo-anarchism with the localism and neo-communitarianism of J.K. Gibson-Graham. "This orientation toward relating politics and the political would be something like the... perfectionist position of Cavellian ethics, and something like Agamben's 'means without end,' where the pure mediality of being in the present of the political and the sensual is what matters" (260). Thus, I propose two general, related sites through which we may come to spot Cavell's influence, or at least his precedent, in Berlant's project: the ordinary, and the "poetics of misrecognition that infuse this ordinary;" as well as Cavell's version of a (moral) perfectionism – his perfectionist orientation.

### *Stanley Cavell's Sense of the Ordinary*

The ordinary is a central and original concept for Stanley Cavell. And "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," Cavell's 1986 Tanner Lecture, is a logical place to begin as it explicitly sets out to review this central concept. While the essay's opening gesture situates Cavell's sense of ordinary as somewhat apart from Heidegger's (e.g. in "the Origin of the Work of Art"), it also acknowledges an affinity. According to Cavell, Heidegger's ordinary goes as follows: that the ordinary is extra-ordinary insofar as it is that which constitutes our "common habitual world," yet this composition is flawed for Heidegger as it comes under and is influenced by his account of the technological. "[I]t is thus to be seen as a symptom of what Nietzsche prophesied, or diagnosed, in declaring that for us 'the wasteland grows'" (*Quest* 154).

Cavell's engagement with the ordinary began out of a defense of the work of his teacher, J.L. Austin, which is to say Austin's ordinary language philosophy. For Cavell this means taking up the ordinary, at least in part, out of the threat posed to it by philosophical skepticism. But

what interests us here, in relation to Berlant's critical-affective engagement with the ordinary, is how Cavell describes the affinity, perhaps the "mutual derivation," of his sense of the ordinary with that of Heidegger's. Cavell suggests, "[B]oth Heidegger's view and mine respond to the fantastic in what human beings will accustom themselves to, call this the surrealism of the habitual... I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian forever fantastic" (QO, 154). Years later, reflecting on Wittgenstein's ordinary, Cavell would write: "The ordinary occurs essentially in *Philosophical Investigations* as what skepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends, as it were a fictional place produced by philosophy's flight from everyday ungroundedness or prejudices or fixations" (195).

### *Perfectionism*

Regrettably, there is not the space in this paper to take up a proper consideration of Cavellian perfectionism and perfectionist ethics, particularly in relation to *Cruel Optimism*. What follows is a merely an introduction to the concept.

We will come to see how the perfectionist orientation will relate back to Cavell's sense of the ordinary: namely, with the problem of skepticism and its overcoming - that to be a self, "a human individual," one must be capable of relating to oneself in a variety of ways, "including that of adopting a detached or impartial perspective upon oneself; one can thereby take an interest in oneself as having attained a particular state and as capable of moving beyond that state" (Mulhall *Cavell* 15). When the capacity of the perfectionist orientation is active, the self becomes engaged in an "endless process of self-development- endless because every attained state of the self neighbors a further, unattainable but attainable state which forms its horizon, its possible future" (Mulhall 14). Cavell describes this process as the "evaluation of a way of life, of a stance toward one's life as such rather than toward individual course of conduct" (*Tomorrow* 120). However, this capacity is not always necessarily active - of course this is one of the grave lessons exhibited by *Cruel Optimism*; in other words, it can certainly become eclipsed. Whether the capacity is eclipsed by holding on to the material conditions of the state one is already in, or the by the overwhelming present moment (the experience of scrambling to meet the ongoingness of the overwhelming present), or by the blindness of cruel optimism, or "by the efforts of oneself or others to disguise the attractions of one's neighboring, unattainable but attainable self" (Mulhall 14) - varies from case to case, but regardless, what is at stake for both Cavell, and Lauren Berlant, is that the "eclipse of that openness to the unattained future amounts to the eclipse of the self's capacity to grow, to change itself in the name of a better... state of self and of society" (Berlant 157).

Certainly, this kind of perfectionist statement is complicated by the intricate workings of a false optimism whose fantastic forms of a better (normative?) future already serve to eclipse the subject's capacity to change, thus maintaining its hindrance within the impasse. That kind of optimism for the future anterior (the good life-to-come) would have to be distinguished

from the perfectionism I am glossing here. Nevertheless, what I think is important to grasp is how the *loss* of this capacity for an endless self-development is, as the critic Stephen Mulhall describes it, “the loss of an essential aspect of selfhood – the capacity to set and pursue, but particularly to revise, one’s conception of the good” – or, in Berlant’s, of the good life, that is, the visibility of a better good life (14). In other words, what is at stake is the loss of positive forms of aspirational life.

### *Berlant’s “Crisis Ordinarity” & Cavell’s Ordinary*

*Cruel Optimism* also registers its author’s dissatisfaction with the genres/modes of catastrophe and trauma for characterizing the historical present. Berlant’s sense is that a more common and ubiquitous mode of adaptation to the systemic crises of the everyday is needed; she calls this counter-notion “crisis ordinarity” and it is designed to counter the genre of crisis which is critiqued as “a heightening interpretative genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation” (7). On the contrary, the genre of crisis ordinarity captures the sense in which “crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10). This navigation of the ordinary happens through an ongoing “logic of adjustment” distinguished from trauma’s merger of “the intense with the exceptional and the extraordinary.” In other words, for Berlant, trauma is a specialized style, capable of managing only a limited number of *events* (10, emphasis mine). What’s more, these singular intensities of “an event” spread out into “modes, habits, or genre of being” in the world – and it is these modes of living that pervade and compose the ordinary. This what Alex Lockwood has in mind when calling attention to the concept’s “non-dramatic potentials” (2).

This diffused and “quieter” affect of the ordinary, a scale and temporality precluded by trauma is found at the heart of a short paper by Stanley Cavell titled “The Ordinary as the Uneventful,” in which he claims, “there is a history of the human being to which we are blinded by the traditional histories of flashing, dramatic events” (*Cavell* 255). Elsewhere Cavell suggests that the ordinary is manifested in its “unremarkableness (the missableness), together with the remarkableness (the unmistakability) of [it]” (*Tomorrow* 25). The crisis ordinary of precarious life and labor, in *Cruel Optimism*, is an unremarkable genre, and its very missability takes place - in part - because of how crisis gets spread out and diffused throughout the day-to-day of the ordinary and “its situations of living on” (81); how so often the the unmistakable suffering of the everyday is simply bypassed or *missed*. It is for these reasons Berlant claims: “Long-term problems of embodiment within capitalism, in the zoning of the everyday, the work of getting through it, and the obstacles to physical and mental flourishing, are less successfully addressed in the temporalities of crisis and require other frames for elaborating contexts of doing, being, and thriving” (105).

Berlant's sense of the ordinary as a space and temporality of low-grade, sustained crisis management also connects to her concept of "slow death." Slow death is developed alongside crisis ordinariness as a method to "conceptualize contemporary historical experience, especially where that experience is simultaneously at an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life" (104). Slow death is an experience of precarity, and I am interested to juxtapose this sense of slow death/precarity with what Cavell calls Wittgenstein's counter-myth to that of the expulsion from Eden (*Investigations*, §107): "We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk" (qtd. in *Tomorrow* 196). Cavell notes that for Wittgenstein this inability to walk represents a "break in our natural history" (citing §25 where walking is listed as "part of our [human] natural history"), he interprets "unable to walk" "not as the description of some specific failure" but as "a symbolic expression" in this case "something about our inability to move ourselves in accordance with our apparent desires" (197).

How else might we understand this "natural history of the human"? Cavell suggests, again vis-à-vis Wittgenstein, that what distinguishes the human from other forms of life is "that the human is the animal that is unnatural...fated to chronic dissatisfaction with its lot – unless you wish to say that the compulsion to escape the human lot, to overcome the human...is precisely what *is* natural to the human" (208). That the compulsion to overcome this dissatisfaction is "natural" to the human becomes a provocative statement in the context of *Cruel Optimism*. For example, how do we read this notion within a thick schema (Berlant's) that suggests those caught in the double bind of cruel optimism (which seems to be most of us still faintly touched by a "good life" fantasy, but especially working class folks bound up in an attachment to the normative promises of middle class life) are *unable* to overcome their dissatisfaction? In other words, does the precarious contemporary imply an impossibility of this overcoming, and what does this mean for being human today? Furthermore, how might this impasse alter everything that is modern and optimistic in how Cavell reads?

### *The Crisis Ordinary, II*

Cavell's "Uncanniness of the Ordinary" lecture is rich, and one convenient point of entry would be his initial gloss of Poe's "The Purloined Letter." If "The Purloined Letter" is "a tale in which something is missed just because it is obvious," a tale of missing what is in plain view, "as if a little too self-evident, a little too plain to notice, as [if] it were beneath notice," then crisis ordinariness would be of this tale's genre. Not a state of exception, nor its opposite, "mere banality" in Berlant's language, but a "domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered

scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock” (102). Cavell’s ordinary becomes that which is hidden in plain view, and again this is its very (un)remarkableness. Even more apropos is how the summoning of such a tale leads Cavell to this remark of Wittgenstein’s, from the *Philosophical Investigations*: “The aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and ordinariness. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes) [§129]” (qtd. in *Quest* 164).

Listening for the resonances with Berlant’s topography of the everyday ordinary, I note Cavell’s interest in how Wittgenstein – in a way for Cavell that is characteristic of the *Investigations* – speaks to us “quite as if we have become unfamiliar with the world, as if our mechanism of anxiety, which should signal danger, has gone out of order, working too much or too little” (*Quest* 165-166). This strangeness is something like cruel optimism’s attachment to the “compromised conditions” of an ordinariness whose presence – its unseen actualities – actually threatens the well-being and thriving of the subject. Nonetheless, the attachment cannot be abandoned for, in Berlant’s formulation, the subject “might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire” (24). Once more, part of the dilemma here is how to a precarious subject caught within cruel optimism’s double bind, their suffering is not unlike how Cavell presents the blurring of “countless moments” in the *Investigations* – “we are made uncertain” if they are “remarkable or casual” (166); this is the shared ambivalence of the ordinary in Cavell and Berlant.

Additionally, I am reminded of an essay entitled “Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,” where amongst other things, Cavell is curious to read the “surface of containment” and the “imagination of the social” in Jane Austen’s novels. He is inclined to juxtapose the emotionality and distress of Nietzsche and, yes, Jane Austen and manages to do so in the following manner: “You might say that [Austen’s] prose seeks incessantly to minimize (hence maintain) the expression of distress in everyday existence no less drastically than Nietzsche’s seeks to maximize” (*Tomorrow* 124). Alongside this unlikely pairing, I want to ask does not Berlant’s prose (its genre) normalize distress in ways perhaps “no less drastic” than those writers who excite Cavell? Or maybe this is ineluctable (by way of the genre); that the very definition of precarity could be the normalization of distress, the ordinary crisis of getting on in the *longue durée*. Whatever we make of precarity’s forms, it is nonetheless a testament to how well Berlant writes, namely how well she writes genre into being.

### *We Find Ourselves on a Stair*

In the opening pages of *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant sets the stage for her observation (her sense) of the historical present: tracking the “emergence of a precarious public sphere” the “book is about what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectations whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to ‘have a life’ that adjustment seems like an accomplishment” (3).



I would like to position alongside Berlant's portrait of the precarious public sphere a passage from Emerson's essay "Experience," one which Cavell is fond of quoting: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight" (*Tomorrow* 99).

I am tempted to read this passage as an almost proto-affective measure (or anticipation) of the atmosphere Berlant creates in *Cruel Optimism*. "On the stair" is a space-time of constant flux and movement, and it seems to me that the figure on this stair could almost be that of the freelancer, a figure taken up by Berlant in her reading of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognitions*. "[T]he freelancer is one of the sovereign figures of neoliberalism, the person on contract, who makes short-term deals for limited obligation and thrives through the hustle over the long haul...[preferring] entrepreneurial precarity to the too closeness of the world" (76). The freelancer is in motion, typically, generically, and her life becomes the experience of "migration from one place to another." The precariat can then be seen to embody a movement that actually goes somewhere, as in the case the "thriving" freelancer, or to embody a more static tempo such as the low-down hustle of the precarious everyday, where one exhausts oneself in the scramble, but never really gets anywhere: "In a race to jog in place, to not lose a step, or trip: to maintain – no, attain – composure;" that a present to "which we are always catching us is *the way we live now*" (59). This way of reading Emerson's fragment takes it as an adequate description of trying to make a life under "that porous domain of hyperexploitative entrepreneurial atomism that has been variously dubbed globalization, liberal sovereignty, late capitalism, post-Fordism, or neoliberalism" (*Cruel Optimism* 167).

### ***Modernism - "Everyday Life Theory" - Lauren Berlant***

As I've already acknowledged, Berlant locates herself within a historical present where something epistemologically different is required from everyday life theory ("from Simmel through Benjamin, Lefebvre, and Nigel Thrift"). Beyond that distinction, I am curious to put Berlant's differentiation of her own idiom/work from those such as critic Harry Harootunian in conversation with how Stanley Cavell articulates his sense of the ordinary, of what the ordinary can do, as a response to the threat of philosophical skepticism. In other words, that the discovery of "exactly *what*" skepticism would deny, namely the ordinary everyday, is perhaps akin to what for Berlant gets lost in the "old [and hereby inadequate] structuralisms of the before and after" (69).

In "The Wittgensteinian Event," Cavell writes, "The ordinary occurs essentially in *Philosophical Investigations* as what skepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends, as it were as fictional place produced by philosophy's flight from everyday ungroundedness or prejudices or fixations" (*Tomorrow* 195). It is beside this characteristic utterance from Stanley Cavell – so

central to his thought – that I want to consider Berlant's methodology (her “sensual idiom... of reading the historical through its affective utterance in a present encounter”), a methodology borne out of discouragement with what she perceives as an ongoing disrespect for “what's apprehensible in the ordinary” (69).

Returning to Cavell, “The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us” (*Quest* 171). This statement is interesting in how it both captures Berlant's desire to recover the ordinary, but, I think, also appeals in an uncanny way to the notion of the aspirational good life (or *any* life, for that matter – as long as it is one that promises), a fantasy that is kept up amidst its own atmospheric dissolution. And by “Berlant's desire to recover the ordinary” I simply mean her rejection that the ordinary must be conceived of as in suspension, or unavailable to criticism and thus beyond apprehension.

A reading of the (historical) present as lost to us, or inaccessible, would be located by Stanley Cavell as already in Thoreau's *Walden* where Thoreau described *Walden*/*Walden* as the “present experiment” - meaning both the book we can now read, but also “that the experiment *is* the present, that is, that the book set itself to test ways of arriving at the present, not merely at what people call ‘current events,’ which for [Thoreau] are not current, but old news, and are not events, but fancies” (*Quest* 171). For Cavell then, under the sign of Wittgenstein and Thoreau, “there is nothing beyond the succession of each and every day; and grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, *is not a given but a task*” (*Quest* 171, emphasis mine). By now it should be obvious that grasping (sensing) the ordinary is the task of *Cruel Optimism*, a book which undertakes the project of redescribing “the *something* developing within the geopolitical field that makes itself known as unstable, if not in crisis” (69). And testing new ways of arriving at the present is what Lauren Berlant must do if she is to ask these questions of the now: “What constitutes continuity amid the pressure of structural inconstancy? What is the good life when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility and collective uplift that national/capitalism promised goes awry in front of one? What is life when the body cannot be relied on to keep up with the constant flux of new incitements and genres of the reliable, but must live on, maintaining footing, nonetheless?” (69). Still, for Berlant the present is not just an experiment, it is also a state that cannot name its own condition, for to do so would likely be to admit its own defeat, its own abandonment or paralysis, its “inheritance of an impossible life” (187).

How interesting it might be to consider Cavell's prescriptions as anticipating both the ordinary everyday ethnographies of *Cruel Optimism*, but also a larger body of work whose “inception” Berlant identifies with the Deleuzian strain in Jameson's work, and now elaborated “by theorists like [Kathleen] Stewart and [Brian] Massumi,” which looks “differently at the contemporary everyday, as movements within the present demand different dramas of adjustment and sensual self-development from the capitalist modes of the past” (69). (Or perhaps my conjecture is that Cavell would not necessarily be a

previsional figure for these thinkers, but a kind of curious, though pertinent if not unavoidable, “avuncular” relation.)

Here, I’ve offered up a consideration of Cavell’s view of how (the malady of) skepticism brings us, in his tradition, to the “discovery” of the everyday. The “senses of Stanley Cavell” means a sensing of the present’s disarray – of how the ordinary escapes us through a loss of proximity to it, and how we tend to escape ourselves when inhabiting a milieu that itself feels lost. In this light, Cavell’s apprehension of the not eventless but *uneventful* ordinary is useful in adding another layer to Berlant’s construction of the everyday, or in comprehending how she has approached it and from where.

### *Notes on Genre, and the Waning of Genre (A Concluding Section)*

In *Cruel Optimism*, all genre is filtered through the book’s main genre – “the impasse.” Through the generic screen of impasse, genre old and new is tested by the temporalities and topographies of precarity. In a precarious situation (i.e. a new, developing genre of compromised “social time and practice”), social relations and relations of habitude and habitation are felt to be shifting, *yet* the rules for habitation and narrative are “unstable, in chaos” (6). For a subject of cruel optimism, one who inhabits the precarious, the situation comedy is an ironic aspiration and a dangerous fantasy – hardly applicable to the real stakes (for some) of getting by today. (Recall, that for Berlant the “situation comedy” portrays a world never “too destabilized” by a situation, and though things turn out wrongly nothing significant is ever lost in this comic process.) On the other hand is “the menacing new realism” of the “situation tragedy,” revealing a tableau in which the “subject’s world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unraveling” (6). Shifts in genre, Berlant explains, can direct us to new techniques of sensing “improvisations with the ordinary,” and in this formulation it follows that “supermodernity/ neoliberalism produces the situation tragedy as a way of expressing the costs of what’s ordinary now” (291 n19).

*Cruel Optimism* finds the situation tragedy exemplified in two films, *Rosetta* and *La Promesse*, by the Dardenne brothers. “In the Dardennes’ films, the formal achievement of genre and gender suggests not success but survival, a survival reeking of something that partakes of the new generic hybrid, *situation tragedy*: the marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying” (177). Here, the young protagonists, Igor and Rosetta, occasionally display “heart-wrenchingly” the desire to live as though inhabiting the stable boundaries of the situation comedy. But these are scenes of cruel optimism, for the situation comedy imagines a world with “*the kind of room for us that enables us to endure*,” yet as the reader of *Cruel Optimism* understands, and the precarious cinema of the Dardennes tragically displays, this kind of capacious and forgiving world is not the inhabited world now named the precarious public sphere (177).

However, it doesn't seem that Lauren Berlant has given all precarious genre over to the tragic. In *Cruel Optimism's* final chapter Berlant takes up the counterdramatics of American guerilla art activists, the Surveillance Camera Players. In their do-it-yourself, provisional aesthetics she identifies a comic project that actuates a kind of recuperation of an ordinary perceived as too-thick, fixed, and nonporous. With the Surveillance Camera Players' antics Berlant describes a version of resistance, or refusal, one that refuses to "allow the security state's saturation of the ordinary to go without saying." In this recovery of the everyday framing of contemporary ambient citizenship the players perform (produce?) a "most powerful pedagogy" by staging a disruptive "cheerleading [with which comedy] can contribute in order to motivate the body politics to perform intimate, physical, live reciprocity in the ordinary spaces of life itself" (244). In closing, I will propose that the minor space that Berlant holds open for DIY comic projects can then be understood as a space that reopens the possibility of a perfectionist orientation to oneself and one's scene and also as a context with which to view the long consideration Stanley Cavell has given to another optimistic genre – the comedy of remarriage.

To go back in time, and therefore back in (economic) history, we encounter this much studied genre of Cavell's. Emerging from the Depression, these are Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s – "the genres of remarriage comedy [which] comprise the best comedies of the golden age of Hollywood cinema" (*Tomorrow* 120). The comedy of remarriage also returns us our initial theme, that of the ordinary; Cavell, for example, concludes "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" with a reading of George Stevens' 1942 *Woman of the Year* because for him the film is exemplary insofar as it is "symptomatic of everyday thinking." Yet here too is the element of refusal we discover in Berlant's comic resistance, for Cavell's real interest in *Woman of the Year* is how it is also "symptomatic of the everyday recognition that our habitual modes of thought are destructive, and as an everyday effort to step back from them" (*Quest* 170).

What is unique to this genre of comedy will also allow us to circle back to Cavell's place in the opening of Berlant's text, to that optimistic moment where the "ordinary is an intersecting space where many forces and histories circulate and become 'ready to hand'... for inventing new rhythms for living" (*Cruel Optimism* 9), but also in considering that what is unique to these films is their potential study of "the possibility of a perfectionist life in a democracy," in a moment where modification and/or reinvention is still possible (*Tomorrow* 120). What is unique could then be described as how this moment in Hollywood cinema offered a vision, albeit shot as luxurious and bourgeois, of reclaiming and redefining the parameters of the ordinary. Cavell writes, "So far as I know, the happiness of [re]marriage is dissociated from any a priori concept of domesticity (you might also call marriage in these films the taking of mutual pleasure without concept – whether two people are married does not necessarily depend on what age they are, or what gender, or whether legally)." And he continues, "Marriage here is being presented as an estate meant not as a distraction from the

pain of constructing happiness from a helpless, absent world, but as the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgement of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday" (*Quest* 178). Cavell's optimism for transformation corresponds to the fleeting optimism of Berlant, an optimism that would not be cruel. Following Lockwood, this is the shared hope that the writing (the analysis, or the *present experiment*) will "incite others to analyze the crises of the present moment" (2). And for Berlant, that in the perfectionist passage opened up, as in Cavell's reading of the remarriage comedy, one may experiment with "new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself, which requires debating what the baselines of survival should be in the near future, which is now, the future we are making" (262).

As former fantasies of "state-liberal-capitalist" security and normalcy wane, we find ourselves in a zone of uncertainty and ambivalence as we no longer know what it means to "have a life," and to have a life that both makes sense *and* makes a living. This at least is the guiding principle of *Cruel Optimism*, and the affective recording of a precarious atomism released from familiar institutional "assurances." Whether Cavell's comedy of remarriage has anything to teach the contemporary is a question to be posed; as are Stanley Cavell's economics and his sense of political economy. If his comic genres are exceptional in their Fordism, or their literary Romanticism, or their mid-century optimism then they may be irrevocably lost to us. However, my suspicion is that this is not entirely the case, and with Lauren Berlant I am holding out that something can be salvaged from both Cavell's ethics and his ways of reading. For one thing, in the comedy of remarriage "nothing legitimizes or ratifies marriage – not state, or church, or sex, or gender – apart from the willingness for reaffirmation, which is to say remarriage... [a] diurnal devotedness that involves friendship, play, surprise" (*Tomorrow* 121-122). However unlikely it may seem, the comedy of remarriage may still have something to teach the post-Fordist scene – this time of scavenging (longing?) for genre in the presence of its absence; and finally and not least that one, optimistically, remains teachable, and thus can turn, can do or not do.

The loss of presentness - of a world, of a milieu, or of genre – all are reminiscent of the violence done by skepticism "and its desperation to correct" so thoughtfully studied by Stanley Cavell. That the loss of presentness births tragedy is an old story, and one that *Cruel Optimism* demonstrates has only intensified in this time of spectral late liberalism. Lauren Berlant's book should then be read as a "book of losses," which is also how Stanley Cavell once described *Walden*. What's more, is that both books begin with statements of departure. For *Walden*, in the creation of its own region (Walden Pond), thus a genre of itself, represented "everything there is to lose, and the book opens with it gone, forgone" (*Quest* 171). And elsewhere Cavell writes, "Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of *Walden*... [O]ur relation to the world is no longer secured by the world" (*Senses*

119). (Emerson's "complex structuring concept for this departure is *abandonment*, abandonment of and to... the world" (*Quest* 175).)

Thus *Walden* and *Cruel Optimism* are also books of mourning: the mourning of the promises of a nation and its original expression of liberty, the mourning of economy, and the mourning of the aspirational Fordist "good life." Lauren Berlant, in mourning for our lives, mourns the normalcy and normativity of our quiet desperation. The only ordinary optimism then, in either Cavell or Berlant, is to focus one's attention to "the homonymic sound 'mo(u)rning,' meaning both dawning and grieving, [for] we are being told that every illumination of the world we have been party to has passed away and is something we must learn to rid ourselves of, say to reevaluate, to recount, to mourn" (*Tomorrow* 119). This is Berlant's insistence that to "belong to the normal world is to misrecognize only certain modes of intelligibility as expressing one's true self" (125) and that is through a poetics of Cavellian recognition of and in the ordinary that *something* could become ready to hand for inventing new forms of relation, "new rhythms of living."

For Cavell, the potentiality of mo(u)rning is in its "aversive nature," which is Emerson's term for the kind of turning at stake; it is that which is "averse to the demand of conformity" (*Tomorrow* 117). This is the sense of finding oneself "in contradiction to [one's] today." Cavell writes, "Nietzsche also explicitly in this matter invokes the image of turning, as in Emerson's 'aversion,' challenging his reader to a 'reversal [*Umkehrung*] of one's habitual estimation and esteemed habits' (of what I earlier called our interests and our sense of what is important)" (117). The moment of mo(u)rning/turning locates what is potentially extraordinary about the ordinary, and joins with Cavell's reading of Nietzsche's philosopher - that man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow - which approximates the German *Morgen* and *Übermorgen*. And to what end? That if we "[t]ake *Morgen* in its sense of morning, as well as of tomorrow, we may discern an idea of an after-, or over-, or super-morning... [t]hen the idea is that the further- or over-morning is the day realized, reconceived" (118). What then could it mean that, following Nietzsche and Cavell, the potentiality of a moment of mo(u)rning would be to create a world out of nothing, rather than "creating a nothing out of the world [*aus der Welt ein Nichts schaffen*]" (129)? Perhaps this is what Cavell had in mind when suggesting that "learning mourning may be the achievement of a lifetime" (172).

"To allow the world to change, and to learn change from it, [...] accepting its own strangeness, are conditions of knowing it now," is how Stanley Cavell closes his *Senses of Walden* (119). First though, we must acknowledge Berlant's dilemma: the double bind of a good life fantasy that not only endangers but cannot be dispelled, nor is truly attainable. Then, with Chekhov, we might say, as commonplace, "I am in mourning for my life." That "placing a lost self in a land that is gone is an exercise of mourning" (Cavell *Reply* 590). From this position I do not know to what or where. If I could only begin to decelerate the exhausting and too-rapid dressage of "getting by," or somehow suspend its anxiety for

awhile, I might inquire as to care and the nature of friendship, the locatedness of it. I might even inquire into friendship as a way of life. I might ask of my friends, those *near* to me, what it is we shall do, about it, together. “It”? That being the near future, the common ordinary which is here and all around us; the historical now which is nothing more than the proximate— to inquire how it might be distorted on “behalf of what the present can become” (*Cruel Optimism* 163).

*In a moment of crisis ordinariness, anything can be reanimated: but the profoundly transformative cause remains elusive, as though so much fraud and betrayal homogenizes the pitch without adding up to something. The time without genres of the event is the time when the narratives fade toward the lyric.*

- Lauren Berlant, “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness”

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